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ABSTRACT

Literature is reviewed to identify findings indicating the effects of the one-parent family on the elementary school child's academic achievement and social and emotional development. While findings are contradictory in the area of academic achievement, it is concluded that disruption in home life accompanying death, separation, or divorce is probably severe enough to impair school performance to some degree and to require educational intervention. Further research is recommended to take into consideration the sex of the child, family income, and educational opportunities, as well as to compare achievement records before and after family status transition. The literature review indicates that in the area of emotional development controversy centers on the degree to which divorce or the loss or absence of a parent "damages" a child. It is suggested that the most important variables in the child's emotional adjustment to his or her new lifestyle are the nature and quality of the new family arrangements, the extent and duration of changes imposed, and the new psychological climate provided. The point is made that research on the social reactions of children from single-parent homes reveals differences between children from intact and single-parent families--differences associated with adjustment to a new lifestyle. Again, more research is recommended. (RH)

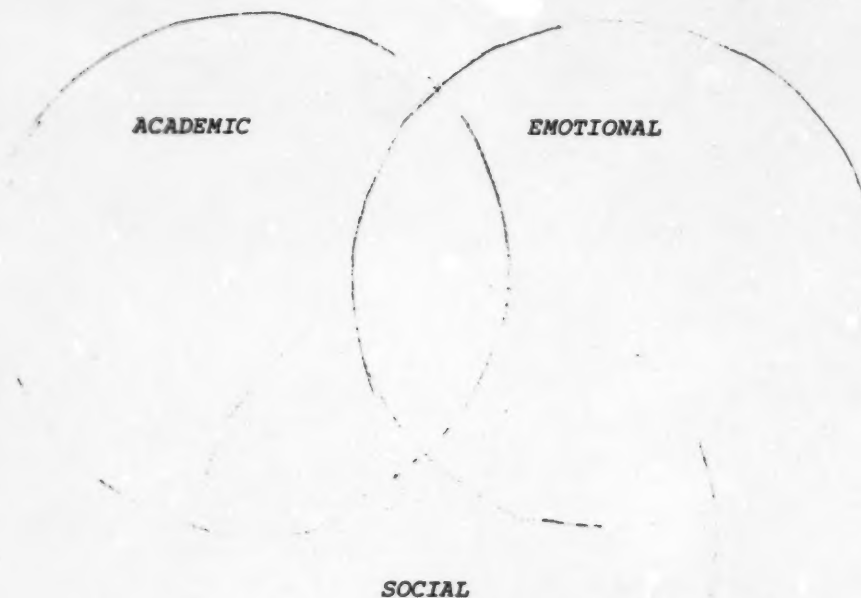
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*The Effect of the Single-Parent Family on the Academic
Emotional, and Social Achievement of the Elementary School Child*



by

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The Effect of the Single-Parent Family
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PURPOSE

One of the duties of an educator is to be sensitive to the changing needs of the population he or she serves. Currently, teachers are observing an increase in the number of children coming from one-parent families and perhaps some new problems. It is the intention of this paper to examine how the transition from a two-parent to a one-parent family may affect the academic, emotional, and social achievement of an elementary school child.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

The single-parent or one-parent family is defined as a family consisting of children living with "one" parent or guardian as a result of death, divorce, or separation. This also includes children living with mothers who have never been married.

FINDINGS

School Achievement

Overall, the studies on the effects of the single-parent family on a child's school achievement have been contradictory. Some studies find little or no difference between children from intact families and those from single-parent families, while others find that children do more poorly when raised in a single-parent situation. It appears that these two opposing viewpoints have transpired due to the

fact that too many variables in important characteristics in the children studies have been experienced in the majority of studies conducted.

In general, it is becoming apparent that these variables which were not taken into consideration in many of the earlier studies may shed new light onto the true cause and effect regarding the impact of the single-parent family on school achievement.

Early findings on academic achievement almost always concluded that one-parent children should lower achievement in school than their two-parent classmates. It was seen that with the loss or absence of a parent (usually the father) there was also a decrease in both the quality of the family intellectual environment and the quality of the family moral and emotional environment.

Even in the last decade findings regarding academic achievement have varied. In a 1978 study on father absence, Fowler and Richards often found no difference in intelligence or the academic achievement between father-present and father-absent lower-class black children. They also revealed, even at that time, that the child's sex may be a determining factor in achievement, even more so than the father's presence. (Fowler, 1978). In a 1979 article by J. Hammond, various areas were analyzed regarding the effect of divorce on a child's school achievement and behavior. In the academic measures of reading and mathematics achievement, no significant differences were found between children from divorced and intact families. In mathematics, achievement

by single-parent boys was lower than that of boys from intact homes, but not to a significant level. Little difference was found in the girls studied (Hammond, 1979). Frank Brown in 1980 compared differences in school achievement and numerous other areas and found that the children in one-parent families rated lower in all areas studied. (Brown, 1980). Another study conducted in 1980 by the Institute for Development of Educational Activities confirmed this theory that children living with only one parent have more trouble in school than children from intact families, including lower academic achievement. It did, however, cite that there is a problem as to just what features of the one-parent environment tend to foster lower achievement and that other variables may be responsible (Institute for..., 1980).

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) published a report in 1980 which revealed the results of a study which looked at the school needs of elementary school children from single-parent families. It was found that 38% of children from one-parent families were rated as low achievers (attaining grades of D-F or 50-70%) compared to 23% from intact families. On the other hand, only 17% of children from one-parent families were rated as high achievers (attaining grades of A-B or 80-100) compared to 30% from intact families (NAESP, 1980).

Interestingly the NAESP in a 1982 report based on a reanalysis of this same data collected in 1980 has revised the earlier study which implicated the single-parent family as a major cause of low school achievement and behavior problems in children. By considering additional

variables, it was found that the number of parents in the home seemed to have a lesser effect on achievement than did the family income and the child's gender. Generally, children from families with high incomes and girls tend to have better grades. It was even concluded that girls from high income homes with only one-parent got better grades than boys from high income homes with two parents (NAESP, 1980).

Such a division of theory as presented in the preceding paragraphs certainly leads one to believe that more research into this area is needed. It is probably realistic to assume that the disruption in home life that typically accompanies death, separation or divorce is enough to impair a child's school performance to some degree. Any of us can attest to the fact that any major dishevelment of one's life style causes some aspects of our performance to suffer-children are no different. However, the question here is "Is it the one-parent environment itself which tends to lower achievement?"

Future research which would take into consideration important variables in groups of children studied, such as -- sex of the child, family income, educational opportunities, and the comparison of the "before and after" achievement records of children going from a two-parent to a one-parent home (and vice versa) may prove helpful in the study of academic achievement and the single-parent family.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that single-parent children compose a substantial minority who are likely to have academic trouble in school and may need additional help from educators (Institute for ..., 1980).

Emotional Development

Divorce or the loss or absence of a parent is a difficult adjustment for a child at any age. However, the degree to which it "damages" a child has been a topic of disagreement.

In the case of divorce, most people take it for granted that divorce is damaging to children. That is why so many couples stay together for the sake of the children, or so they say. But recent psychological findings suggest that a one-parent household may be better for children than a legally intact marriage in which the parents fight a great deal. "Quality of parenting is more important than quantity of parents: (NAESP, 1980). However, even though the divorce may eventually prove beneficial to the child, the initial crisis of the family dissolution is a difficult period in the child's life.

Pegardless of how much better off the family environment may be after a divorce, the stress felt during such a crisis often affects a child's performance. Instead of the familiar two-parent family, children must adjust to a new family structure and lifestyle--a process which is usually met with fear and anxiety even though their life in a two-parent family may have been painful. It is a trying time where routine and expectation are now substituted by a situation which is ominous, orderless and uncertain. It should be noted here, however, that there are cases where younger children who were exposed to violent confrontations between their parents and older children who were overly burdened by their parents marital difficulties experience the move to a one-parent structure with a sense of relief (Kelly, 1980).

Overall, the process of adjustment to the new family structure usually commences with a period of mourning which may include feelings of grief, denial, helplessness, anger, hostility, depression and anxiety. It has been noted that, in cases of divorce, this stage may be extended as children maintain hopes that their parents will unite.

Guilt feelings were seen to occur more frequently among young children who were in an egocentric stage of thinking (Black, 1979). Along with the fear that they were responsible in some way, children also were found to fear whether they would lose their remaining parent (fear of abandonment), and how their future needs were going to be met. With this resulting insecurity, precipitated by the loss of a parent, all children need to be reassured that they were not responsible and that their parents love and still have concern for them.

Children will exhibit any number of behaviors in their attempt to cope and adjust to their particular circumstances. A common reaction to the loss of a parent through divorce was found to be a rise in aggression and "acting out". Withdrawal, depression, restlessness, anxiety, intense sadness, loss of concentration and physical complaints were also among the reactions noted. Of these, withdrawal and depression were observed most often among children whose one parent had died.

In addition, during the adjustment period the parent-child relationship inevitably suffers. The attention received from parents may be reduced at this time due to many factors, such as--one parent being physically absent, the remaining parent having to work full time and thus being less available, and the parents' full energies being used to help

themselves cope with the adjustment. This loss of attention can cause extreme anxiety in a child who now sees his world as unstable, and needs support.

Studies conducted on the emotional aspects facing a child going from a two-parent home to one having only one parent have had, as did the studies on academic achievement, varied results.

In 1976 Kelly and Wallerstein studied the impact of divorce on 7 and 8 year olds shortly after the parental separation and again one year later. Initial responses were found to be sadness, fear for the future, pressure created from the split in loyalty for their parents, and a sense of loss. Teachers also reported outbursts of anger and problems in sharing in these children. One year later the initial pain had disappeared and was replaced by a sad acceptance of the situation. Overall 50% of the children had improved or maintained their level of psychological functioning, while 23% were found to be worse (Kelly, 1976). This same study was then conducted on 9 and 10 year olds. Initial responses included shame, anger, feelings of abandonment, loneliness, decreased concentration and increased aggression. The one year follow-up showed that 50% of the children were adjusting well, while 50% were having difficulties (Kelly, 1976).

A study conducted in 1979 by Hetherington revealed that young children were more likely to be self-blaming when determining the cause of divorce. Adolescents on the other hand, experience pain and anger, but later were able to assign responsibility for the divorce and could seek gratification elsewhere. Hetherington also found that escape from

conflict was probably the most positive outcome of divorce for children and that children in single-parent families were better off than those in an unhappy two-parent home (Hetherington, 1979).

In 1979 Helen and Bermon Raschke concluded through their study that self-concept was more adversely affected by family conflict than by family structure (Raschke, 1979). Rosenthal in 1979 stated that single-parent children displayed behaviors of regression, night terrors, sleepwalking and separation problems (Rosenthal, 1979).

Another in-depth study was conducted in 1979 by J. Hammond on the differences in self-concept, attitudes and academic achievement between children in single-parent homes and those in intact families. She found no significant difference in self-concept, reading and math achievement, immaturity, withdrawal or peer relations. An interesting difference was noted between the sexes however. Teachers rated boys of divorced families significantly higher in behavioral problems such as "acting out" and distractibility, than those from intact families. Also, boys studied from single-parent homes rated themselves as less happy and were more dissatisfied with the time and attention received from their parents. Girls, on the other hand, showed no significant differences. Overall, children of divorce stated that some positive effects can come from divorce, such as less fighting and receiving more presents from parents. Negative aspects were considered to be "not seeing one parent as often" and "having less money" (Hammond, 1979).

Finally, studies in 1980 by Brown, the NAESP, and the Institute for Development of Educational Activities all suggested that the one-parent child had higher rates of truancy, suspensions, expulsions, disciplinary problems and dropouts along with a lower school achievement as discussed previously (Randall, 1981).

As evident through the reading of studies such as the ones presented above, opinions differ as to the areas and the extent to which the children studied were affected emotionally by the conversion to a single-parent situation. The loss of a parent is no doubt a major crisis in the life of a child and one to which the child will change emotionally. Various responses to this "forced adjustment" have been noted through numerous studies.

Perhaps the most important variables in the child's emotional adjustment to his new lifestyle are the nature and quality of his new family arrangements, the extent and duration of the changes imposed upon him, and the new psychological climate now provided. This last variable is an extremely important one in the psychological development of a child regardless of whether he is part of a single-parent home or one in which there are two parents.

In the case of divorce, there are potentials for developmental gains and good psychological adjustment, as well as for a deterioration in a child's psychological well-being. Negative actions such as abandonment, erratic or infrequent visits by the non-custodial parent, parental disinterest, continued conflict and hostility do nothing but work against a child's adjustment to his new lifestyle. In this type of environment the child is less likely to cope with the divorce experience successfully, and may have immense problems dealing with depression,

feelings of being unloved, etc. This in turn affects concentration, school performance, and social behavior.

On the other hand, a positive psychological adjustment to the transition to a single-parent family can be nurtured through steps such as-providing the child with a healthy, stable environment, allowing the child to enjoy a continuing relationship with the non-custodial parent (unless this parent is abusive or psychologically disturbed), and reassuring the child of your love and interest in him. Such provisions can help the child to meet this crisis with a sense of control, security, and self-worth (Kelly, 1980).

Social Behavior

Consistent with the findings from studies on single-parent children and their academic and emotional achievement, studies conducted on the social development of these children also vary, in the degree of significance with respect to the problems noted. This is not to say that the problems these children may encounter or exhibit are not significant, it is just a matter of determining whether these problems are found more frequently or to a greater extent in children because they are from a single-parent environment.

Anytime a person is faced with a major lifestyle change or a problem which causes extreme anxiety, he will inevitably experience a disruption or alteration in his emotional functioning. This in turn has been shown to manifest itself in other areas of a person's performance, such as academic achievement, as previously discussed. Closely related to this area of emotional adjustment in such situations is also one's social behaviors and actions.

Examples of social behaviors observed and compared between children from single-parent homes and two-parent homes have been aggression, anti-social behavior, absenteeism, health problems, tardiness, truancy, delinquent behavior, morals, suspensions, sex role identification and responsibility roles. Once again it should be noted that the extent to which the child's family status is the cause of his problems, or just an accompanying factor, is an area which may require further research (NAESP Repat, 1980).

Aggression, as mentioned in the previous section, has been identified as a response to the loss of a parent and found to be exhibited, particularly among boys, in social interactions with peers. Likewise, an increased level of anxiety is many times expressed by a child through anti-social activities or behaviors which classmates or peers find hard to understand. These disruptions in play and social relations create a situation where the child, who now needs more support and understanding from his friends (and which he normally would get) now may actually be receiving less because of his behavior.

Children from newly formed single-parent families were found in many cases to: actively seek the attention and help of their teachers, play less maturely and with less imagination, be more dependent, "act out" more, and be less cooperative than their classmates from two-parent families. It is interesting to note here that these conditions lasted longer with boys than girls-in fact within two years of the transition in family structure most of these adverse effects had disappeared for girls, while for boys the effects were more enduring (Palker, 1980).

In addition, rates of tardiness, absence, truancy, dropping out and suspensions generally appear to be higher in children from single-parent homes. It has been suggested that these actions may be due to the emotional disruption than can accompany parental separation or death, lack of adequate supervision and feelings of shame, rebellion and withdrawal (Children...1980). Although these and many other findings which are frequently cited report a higher proportion of aggressive, delinquent and anti-social behavior, others often concluded that these children often showed no more, even less, delinquent behavior and fewer adjustment problems than children from unhappy intact homes (Hammond, 1979). So, once again we are faced with the question as to whether or not it is the single-parent family itself which tends to foster this behavior.

Visits to the school nurse for health problems such as physical illness and accident-prone behavior have been observed as a reflection of the underlying effects which the transition to a new family structure may have upon the performance of children in the school environment. Increased incidences of headaches, stomachaches, vomiting after meals, inability to control emotions, and ill-defined complaints are reported in visits to the school nurse by children experiencing emotional trauma.

The preceding topics and others have been researched in numerous studies on the subject of social behavior. In 1973, Heatherington suggested that boys and girls may react differently to family separation. For boys, the effects of father-absence seemed to appear early and

decrease with age, while the effect on girls remained latent until adolescence. At adolescence his study found that girls whose father's were absent exhibited tension and were inappropriately seductive, promiscuous and assertive (Hammond, 1979).

In 1974, Atkinson and Ogston conducted a study on the effect of father-absence on male children in the home and school. Previous studies had suggested that father-absent male children tended to exhibit sex role identification problems, received lower scores on moral dimensions, and were rated lower in personality and social adjustment by their teachers. However, the assessment of questionnaires completed by mothers, teachers and the children themselves in the Atkinson and Ogston Study revealed that although differences in moral values and responsibilities were found, no differences in academic or extra-curricular participation and performance were reported by teachers. In general, there were no appreciable differences noted except in parental disciplinary behaviors (Atkinson, 1979). There have also been studies on the effects male teachers may have on boys who do not have a male parental model at home. Generally, such studies have failed to prove that such a situation makes a significant difference in the children's achievement.

As previously presented, J. Hammond's 1979 report on the comparison of children from divorced homes to those from intact homes revealed that although boys from divorced homes were found to be rated significantly higher in "acting out" and distractibility, no significant differences were found in the areas of peer relations, immaturity or withdrawal (Hammond, 1979).

A final look at research consists of 1980 studies by the NAESP, B. F. Brown and A. Evans/J. Neel. The NAESP revealed in their comparison a single-parent children and two-parent children that elementary school children from single-parent homes had approximately the same number of visits to the school nurse and absences (only one more per year) and no significant differences in problems requiring disciplinary actions, but were more likely to be late and twice as likely to skip school (NAESP Report, 1980). Brown concluded in a similar study that elementary school children from one-parent homes exhibit more behaviors requiring disciplinary action, excessive tardiness, twice as many suspensions, and accounted for more than 1/2 (56%) of the cases of truancy (Brown, 1980). Likewise, Evans and Neel suggested that in the areas of tardiness, absences, health problems, discipline referrals and suspensions differences could be noted (Evans, 1980).

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of social adjustment which, unlike many of the factors mentioned previously, is probably unique to a child now living with only one parent is the child's new role of responsibility. While children in healthy two-parent homes do not play a major role in decision-making (the extent of their decisions may be choosing their own clothes, hobbies, etc.), the child in the one-parent family undergoes a new relationship where he has responsibilities and rights in the household very much like the parent. They are held responsible for chores, caring for younger children, and duties which may have been assumed by the spouse. In other words, they are seen more

as a "junior partner than a subordinate member" in the functioning of the household (Weiss, 1981).

This new role is met in different ways by parents and children. Some parents may begin to rely heavily on a child for comfort, reassurance and support (role-reversal), while others feel the new role helps their children to become independent. Many parents feel that the child suffers due to less time to do homework, play, or do what they want. Children's reactions range between regression to maturing when faced with the new role. Feelings of insecurity or increased self-reliance were found to occur as children began seeing their parents more realistically (having weaknesses and strengths). Overall, however, children were pleased that they were able to meet these new challenges although they regretted having to do so. (Weiss, 1981).

The review of research on the social reactions of children from single-parent homes once again indicates that there are some notable differences found in some areas of the behaviors and social interactions of the child adjusting to a new lifestyle. Behaviors which teachers can be aware of and be ready to try and help with if possible. However, as in the cases of academic achievement and emotional adjustment, more research seems to be warranted which would consider other important variables in the groups of the children studies. This may help in determining the extent to which the single-parent family is the "cause" of these behaviors, or just an associated factor.

POST-THOUGHTS

Evidence from numerous studies and statistics seem to foster the idea that children from single-parent families exhibit changes and adjustments that can affect academic school performance, behavior, and social relations.

Because any child under stress is a child whose learning is at risk, educators must begin to tailor curriculums to encourage these students to progress academically, emotionally, and socially, in spite of their problems. Causes, effects, and solutions to new developments within the realm of education should rapidly be brought to the attention of all school personnel.

Our aim should be the best possible investment for the children is time. It could be most worthwhile for all parties, educators and parents, to make the time to see just how the children in their lives are coping with the difficulties we may unknowingly inflict upon them.

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